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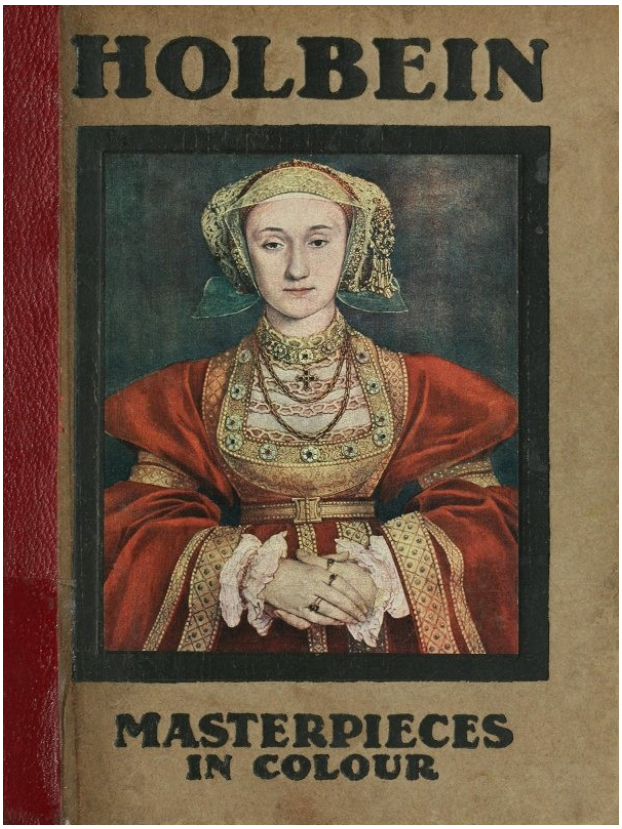

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MASTERPIECES IN COLOUR
EDITED BY T. LEMAN HARE

HOLBEIN

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PLATE I.—GEORGE GISZE. Frontispiece
(In the Royal Museum, Berlin)

This picture of a leading merchant of the Steelyard was painted in 1532, and constituted the artist's successful attempt to capture the patronage of one of the wealthiest merchant communities in the world. That the patronage was forthcoming quickly is suggested by the picture of another merchant of the Steelyard dated the same year, and now in the Windsor collection.

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HOLBEIN

BY S. L. BENSUSAN

ILLUSTRATED WITH EIGHT REPRODUCTIONS IN COLOUR

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I
INTRODUCTION

Hans Holbein the younger is perhaps the most outstanding figure in the history of German art. In the eyes of some he may yield place to his great contemporary Albert Dürer, but it is impossible [12] to deny that for all his indisputable genius Dürer stood for a time that was passing, and Holbein for one that was to come. The younger man touched art at every point, nowhere without mastery; and whether we consider him as a draughtsman, a decorator, a painter of frescoes, a portrait painter, an architect, a modeller, a designer of jewellery, a book illustrator, or a miniaturist, we find ourselves face to face with such an extraordinary measure of achievement, that the claim to remembrance and admiration could be sustained if his art gift had been single instead of universal.

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PLATE II.—THE AMBASSADORS
(In the National Gallery, London)

This picture, painted by Holbein when he was at the zenith of his powers, is well known to visitors to our National Gallery. The figures have been identified by some authorities as Jean de Dinteville and George de Selve, one was the French Ambassador to King Henry's Court, the other a great scholar who also served diplomacy. Both died young. The picture has roused controversy, as certain writers are of opinion that the subjects are Henry and Philip, Counts Palatine of the Rhine.

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Some men are echoes of their own time. Circumstance has made them what they are; their work, however greatly it may please their generation, does nothing to probe the future, to indicate the direction that thought or taste will follow, nor does it set an example for those who are to come. Hans Holbein the younger is of the smaller and more distinguished class that accepts tradition just so far as it is useful or indispensable, and can face the problems of changing seasons and new thought with perfect confidence and unerring instinct, finding no terror in change. His father was an artist, and this fact would seem to have marked out his path in life. But, considering the work he did, in its extent and quality, we have every reason to believe that the artist was born to succeed, and that had he been an engineer, a general, or a statesman, he would have left the same indelible mark upon his generation, and would have been remembered with gratitude and admiration by those who came after him. For he was the strong man armed [16] at all points, who chose to be an artist, though many another path before him would have led to fame.

It is not difficult, if one has a certain measure of talent, to impose upon one's contemporaries. Criticism is seldom exhaustive or final until time has taken its stand between man and his labours, adjusting the earlier perspective that is seldom correct and never exact, but with Holbein the case was different. His generation recognised a genius to which we pay tribute after 350 years have passed away.

"I could make six peers out of six ploughmen," said Henry VIII., who was no mean judge; "but out of six peers I could not make one Holbein."

We who come to pay our tribute of admiration so long after opinion, good or bad, has [17] ceased to concern the artist, are at no small disadvantage. We can learn little or nothing about the personal details of his life; the year of his birth and even the place are in dispute, while between the various authorities who deal with the date of his death there is a difference of no less than twelve years, although the balance of evidence is greatly in favour of the earlier date and shorter life. Moreover, a great part of the artist's output is lost. In these days, when the work of old masters is being discovered so frequently, and many a forgotten *chef d'œuvre* is being rescued from oblivion, there is every reason to hope that the future has something valuable in store for us. But we know that, as far as this country is concerned, much of the labour of Holbein's hands has passed beyond recall. During the Commonwealth many of [18] the artist's pictures were sent to the Continent, the great fire in the Whitehall destroyed some priceless works, and the drawings that attract so many artists to Windsor have had a very chequered career. As far as we can learn, they were collected in the first place by King Edward VI., and were then sold in France, where their owner sold them back to Charles I., who, in his turn, disposed of them to the Earl of Pembroke, from whom they passed to the Earl of Arundel, who disposed of them to King Charles II., who was probably advised in the transaction by Sir Peter Lely. Then they were taken to Kensington Palace, thrown into a drawer and forgotten until, in the time of the Georges, Queen Caroline discovered some and King George III. found the rest. When Queen Victoria ruled over us the Prince Consort gave these masterpieces [19] their present frames and places, and we may presume that they will never be disturbed. It is not unreasonable to suppose that the experience of this famous collection is typical of that which has befallen many other works from the same hand. Our interest in fine art is comparatively modern; only in the last hundred years have the rank and file of cultured, wealthy, or leisured people bethought them of the great treasures that lay neglected in the highways and byways of big cities; and we must not forget that damp, neglect, and indifference are troubles that have a very serious and unfavourable effect upon works of art. The favour extended to a fine picture must be enduring, nor will ten generations of careful attention atone for ten years of bad housing and neglect.

We owe a great deal to Holbein, because [20] he was one of the few great painters of the sixteenth century who pictured the commercial age that others had held in contempt. He seems to have seen that Europe had reached the parting of the ways, and that war was no longer to stand as the greatest interest of national life. To realise how the temper of the world has changed, we need do no more than remember that if the sword is drawn in the twentieth century it is in the service of commerce.

The Renaissance that worked so many wonders in Italy opened Holbein's eyes and broadened his point of view, but after the first few years he turned aside from the Italian influence and looked upon the life around him with eyes that had been aided rather than blinded by the bright light that shone over Milan, Florence, and Venice. He [21] was a realist with an exquisite sense of proportion, and a definite certainty of intention and expression, that kept him from playing tricks with his art. As great opportunities came to him, he took such complete advantage of them that to-day we

may turn to his work and read in it the history of his own fascinating times. He has left us a gallery of the people who ruled a considerable section of middle and western Europe in the first half of the sixteenth century, when the near East was still untouched by Christian civilisation, and few artists looked beyond the Adriatic for sitters or for patronage.

No small part of the Tudor period lives again under Holbein's hand. He gives us the vivid and enduring impression of an age that had found itself, and his subjects walk with [22] fact, just as the creations of his great contemporary Albert Dürer had walked with fancy. As he saw them so he portrayed them, and history brings no charge of flattery against him save in the case of Anne of Cleves, whose portrait he painted for King Henry VIII. before that much married monarch had seen her. Here he is said to have been guilty of flattery, but it was generally believed at the time that Thomas Cromwell, who was his patron and had commissioned the portrait, was responsible for it. The fact that King Henry himself accepted this view, and that Cromwell suffered for it, suggests that there must be no little foundation for the story, though the king certainly understood the worth of a great artist too well to quarrel with him.

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PLATE III.—PORTRAIT OF A MAN
(In the Imperial Gallery, Vienna)

Research has not availed to identify this man, who sits at a table, book in hand, though he has a commanding personality. Few artists have left more portraits beyond the reach of identification than has Holbein. Other remarkable but unnamed studies are to be found in Basle and Darmstadt, at the Berlin Royal Museum, at Windsor Castle, and elsewhere.

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Apart from this work, we look to Holbein for a long roll of kings, princes, churchmen, statesmen, doctors, lawyers, men of letters, reformers, and social celebrities all in their habit as they lived, and vested with the dignity that seems to have been an integral part of the Tudor period. It would seem to have been a curiously practical and business-like age, with rather less imagination than we associate with Elizabethan times. In dealing with one and all of his varied sitters, the painter seems to have preserved the essential characteristics, and, if we must admit the Holbein touch, there is at least no Holbein type. He started his work under the influence of the Renaissance, and with an almost childish delight in decorative effects. As he progressed he threw aside one by one the details that he had ceased to regard as essential, until in the end he could express everything he [26] saw in the simplest possible manner, without any suggestion of superfluity or redundancy, without concession to the merely superficial side of picture-making that stood lesser men in good stead. The extraordinary success of his portraiture is best understood when we learn that for most of his work he did not trouble sitters after the modern fashion. They sat to him for a sketch, and then he took the sketch away with him and produced in due course the finished portrait. When we look at the portraits in the great European galleries, at Windsor or Basle, the Louvre or Munich, we may be astonished that such results should be achieved from mere sketches. But the study of these sketches themselves avails to explain much; and as there are more than eighty of them at Windsor, and these have [27] been reproduced very finely in several volumes, the lover of Holbein has no occasion to

leave this country in order to understand the technique of this branch of the master's work. Naturally an artist is judged very readily by his efforts in portraiture, for they are the things that appeal most readily to the eye; but in the case of Holbein, who would have been a great master if he had never painted a portrait, it is well to look in other directions for evidences of his many gifts. What manner of man he was, how and when he lived and died, is, as we have hinted already, a matter of conjecture; and in setting down the facts of his life that are generally accepted, it is necessary to admit reservations at short intervals. Of course, we would give much to know the full story of his progress, to learn the conditions [28] under which some of his most notable achievements were accomplished, to catch some really reliable glimpses of his domestic life, but in all these matters we have nothing but stray facts and countless conjectures. Even the portrait in Basle that is said to stand for him is a doubtful authority, because it is not clear from the original inscription whether it is of Holbein or by Holbein. We know that he painted it, but we do not know whether he was painting himself. Happily, perhaps, the satisfaction of this curiosity, though it be human and reasonable enough, is not of the first importance. It may suffice us amply that the great artist left many and varied monuments of his achievements, and that the most, or very many, of these are open to our inspection to this day, that they have preserved their [29] quality and their power to teach as well as to charm succeeding generations.

II
THE ARTIST'S LIFE

If we may accept the balance of evidence, Hans Holbein was born in the last years of the fifteenth century in Augsburg, then a city of great importance. The visitor to Bavaria to-day will find few traces of its vanished prosperity, but in the years when Hans Holbein was a little boy Augsburg held merchant princes by the dozen, and men of distinction by the score, and enjoyed the favour of the Emperor Maximilian, himself no mean patron of the arts. In such a city at the beginning of the sixteenth century there would have been a certain community [30] of interest between the leaders of state, commerce, and religion, who, keenly conscious of the honour that had come to Italy through the Revival of Learning and the practice of the arts, would do all that in them lay to devote a part of their wealth and leisure to placing their city in an honourable position. Civic pride was rampant throughout the great cities of Europe in the Middle Ages, and Augsburg was no exception to the rule. Holbein's father, whose work may be studied to great advantage in Berlin, was an artist of repute. He belonged to the Guild of Painters that had been successfully established in the city, and enjoyed the patronage of the leisured classes to an extent that brought a measure of prosperity to all its members. The practice of the arts was comparatively new to [31] Augsburg, and doubtless the story of Italian prosperity had lost nothing on its journey across the Tyrol. The Bavarian city would expect its prosperous Guild to achieve distinction, and was ready and able to respond to progress, so that the conditions were very favourable to endeavour and to success. Every great city sought to achieve renown by raising in its midst, or attracting to its circle, scholars and artists of world-wide repute. Hans Holbein had a double advantage. Not only was the time ripe for his achievements, but the family surroundings were of the kind calculated to develop his powers early. His father, nephew, and brothers were painters, and from his earliest years he would have been brought into intimate touch with the life and work of artists. He would have had access to the hall of the [32] Painters' Guild, where as much as could be secured of the world's fine work was to be seen. The Guild was the centre of a great city's enthusiasms; the work was criticised and studied. Great financiers of Augsburg brought artists and craftsmen from other towns, and it is safe to assume that the best of them would have been found in the hall of the Guild from time to time exhibiting their own work, and telling an interested gathering of the wonders of other cities in days when the journey across the frontiers of one's own country was not to be safely or lightly undertaken. The elder Holbein would have introduced his son into the best artistic circles of his time and place; for although he does not seem to have been the leading artist of his city, he received important commissions from the religious houses, and the collection of sketches in the Berlin National Gallery shows how much the son owed to the father, and what a clever fellow the father was.

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PLATE IV.—JANE SEYMOUR
(In the Imperial Gallery, Vienna)

This portrait is one of the masterpieces of the Vienna Gallery. The queen is painted almost life size, and wears a dark red dress over a petticoat of silver brocade. The marvellous complexion for which she was noted and the fine jewels she wore are rendered with rare skill by the painter.

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Unfortunately history has nothing to tell us of the boyhood of young Hans, though we may gather that his father was in straitened circumstances and not on the best of terms with members of his family who were better off than he. Perhaps we may assume that the *res angusta domi* turned young Han's steps from his father's house while he was yet little more than a boy, for when he could have been no more than seventeen, and was perhaps younger, he and his brother Ambrosius would seem to have left Augsburg for Basle, where so much of his work is to be found to-day. Here in his first youth he painted a rather poor Madonna and Christ, [36] which was discovered little more than thirty years ago after centuries of neglect, and is remarkable chiefly for the tiny Renaissance cherubs on the frame, figures painted with so much freshness, ease, and vigour that one is inclined to overlook the poor quality of the picture they enshrine. It would seem that at the time when this work was painted the elder Holbein had taken his family from Augsburg to Lucerne, and that he was at once admitted to the Painters' Guild there.

It was well for Holbein that he selected Basle as a place of residence, for the chances of his life threw him at a very impressionable age into the company of men who found a fresh field for his talents, and widened very considerably the scope of his achievement. He was not destined to remain constant to painting.

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In 1515 Frobenius and Amerbach the great printers were at Basle, Erasmus had been and gone, and Frobenius must have been attracted by some of the clever sensational work with which Holbein made his artistic debut, for when the third edition of the famous "Breve ad Erasmum" was published by Frobenius, the title-page was designed by Holbein. He was not turning his attention to this class of work to the detriment of others, for we associate with the stay in Basle some half-dozen of the second-rate efforts in paint of a man who is striving to find himself and is at the stage in his life where he is little more than the echo of greater men who have influenced him. Holbein was already a man of all art work; he prepared the title-page of Sir Thomas More's "Utopia," and painted religious [38] pictures or table tops with equal assurance and facility. He was never one of the young men with a mission who shun delights and live laborious days working from dawn to dusk in pursuit of an ideal, and wake one morning to find Fame has arrived overnight. And yet on a sudden he found himself, as his sketches for the portrait of Jacob Meier and Dorothea Kannegiesser testify. Darmstadt and Dresden hold the ripe fruits of his friendship with Jacob Meier, and it would seem that his earliest commission there served to bring him the measure of inspiration that lifts uncertain talent to the height of a great achievement, never to fall back to the ranks of those who struggle year in year out, achieving nothing of permanent value. Certainly he was well served by his sitters, for the man and the woman seem to have been born to be painted.

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PLATE V.—ANNE OF CLEVES
(In the Louvre)

This is the portrait that Holbein was said to have made too flattering, at the instance of Thomas Cromwell. If the story be true, this unfortunate consort of Henry VIII. must have been singularly homely in appearance. This oil-painting on vellum reproduced here gives the suggestion of a woman who could not have roused interest in anybody, and the peculiar quality of something akin to inspiration that Holbein brought to nearly all portrait painting is conspicuous by its absence.

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We do not know what followed when Holbein had found himself. It is stated by some authorities that he left Basle for Lucerne, where he had some trouble with the authorities, and did a certain amount of decorative work. Altdorf is named as a city in which he resided for a time, and it is suggested, not without justification, that he went into Northern Italy and studied some of the master-works of the Renaissance. But by the time he had reached man's estate he had returned to Basle, bringing with him a reputation that he was destined to develop steadily for the rest of his life, and hand down to posterity to be the glory of German art.

His history after being lost for a time finds some record in 1519, when he was admitted to the Art Guild of Basle, and a year [42] later he became a free man of the city and married a widow with two children. Her portrait may be seen in Basle to-day, and there is one that is said to stand for the painter himself, also a work of his hand. The drawing depicts a strong man, who looks out upon the world with serene consciousness that he can play a full and worthy part in it.

When he was a married man and a citizen of Basle, Holbein developed to a very considerable extent his earlier acquaintance with the Humanists. His work was always at the service of the great printers, and, not unnaturally, the authors who were in touch with them took an interest in the young artist who added so much to the attractions of their books. His religious feelings we do not know, but he associated [43] himself with the publication of certain Lutheran pamphlets of marked scurrility, and would seem to have taken his full share in the contest between the Reformers and their opponents. The history of the differences that ultimately drove Erasmus from the city is full of interest and instruction, but the limits of space forbid the disgression necessary to deal with them. Erasmus lives for us in several portraits by Holbein, and there can be no doubt but that association with the leading literary men of the city must have done a great deal to develop in the painter the measure of culture that was to serve him in good stead when he left the city of Basle for places more important and the service of exalted patrons. His designs for wood engravings in the years following his marriage are of the first importance, and include [44] the famous Dance of Death series. He painted among many works of the first class a portrait of his patron Boniface Amerbach, the famous "Dead Man," said by some to be a picture of the dead Christ, a portrait of Erasmus and the "Zetter Madonna." Of these the "Dead Man" is in Basle, one of Erasmus is there, and another is in the Louvre, while the "Zetter Madonna" is at Soluthurn. Of course he did a great deal of work that cannot be enumerated here—work of the most varied description and almost unvarying excellence, and it is clear that he owed not a little of his achievement to the steadiness of his labours. We may reasonably suppose that some of the output is lost, but what is left to this day in Basle amazes us. The Museum is a monument of his talent and industry. Half faded [45] frescoes, panel paintings, subject pictures, portraits, drawings, studies of costume, the eight scenes of the Passion—there is enough in the Museum to console the stranger for all the season of his stay in a singularly unattractive city. We owe the existing collection in a very large extent to Boniface Amerbach, the artist's friend and early patron, who, recognising the permanent value of his output, collected all he could secure, and established the nucleus of a collection that forms to-day Basle's chief claim to distinction. If others had been equally far seeing, many a treasure now lost or destroyed would remain to inspire and to teach; but we must be content with the thought that the work lost through carelessness was probably not the best, and for the rest fire and Puritans are jointly responsible, and it [46] is impossible to argue satisfactorily with either.

Fame travelled slowly in the sixteenth century, but it had not so far to go as it must to-day. The art centres were small and few, they belonged exclusively to the western world, and there were no swarms of influential mediocrities to secure

work that belonged of right to better men. Then again, even in those days, when war was still considered in certain quarters to be the only occupation for a gentleman, art knew no boundaries in the civilised world, and the artist, as a valued contributor to the beauty of life, could pass through countries in which his countrymen of other pursuits would have received scant welcome. Of course there were exceptions to this general rule, and curiously enough Basle, in which the Lutherans were [47] gaining ground so rapidly, had become an impossible place for Holbein by the summer of 1526. Moreover, there was trouble with the famous or notorious Dorothea Offenburg, who would seem to have been a mistress of the painter. Apparently his marriage was dictated more by convenience than affection, and the catholicity of his taste was not limited to things of art. Holbein painted the fair Dorothea twice, apparently in 1526, once as "Venus" and once as "Lais of Corinth." Each portrait may be seen in the large salon of the Museum, and the attractions of the lady must have been more apparent to the painter than they are to us. Some say that it was his desire to flee from before the face of his inamorata that turned Holbein's feet towards London, others that it was the strength of the [48] Lutheran movement that made men look askance at the arts. Be that as it may he came to town, and Basle's loss was England's gain.

It may be remarked here, that while Holbein's long stay in Basle had not been interrupted, there is evidence to suggest, if not to prove, that he followed Amerbach to France. Doubtless his position enabled him to gratify any reasonable desire to travel; and in houses long since demolished, for families long fallen from their high estate if not altogether lost, he may have painted portraits and decorated private chapels or turned his rare gift as miniaturist to good account. No *flâneur* on the high-road of sixteenth-century life, no chronicler of the times and changes of his generation, has anything to record, because the world then took no count of the coming or going of the great men who claimed fame through the arts.

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PLATE VI.—ERASMUS
(In the Louvre)

This marvellous piece of portraiture dates from the year 1523. Holbein painted many portraits of his friend and patron, and at least three belong to this year, one being at Longford Castle. A study for the one reproduced here may be seen in the Basle Museum. The great scholar is treated with a master-hand. Pallid skin, greying hair, dark clothes, and brown panelling go to the making of wonderful colour harmony.

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III
HOLBEIN IN ENGLAND

If we cannot say with any certainty why Holbein came to England, we may at least presume that Sir Thomas More was his earliest patron in these islands, and his famous "Household of Sir Thomas More" would seem to have been the first intimation to a considerable section of English art lovers that a new light had arisen. It was of course most fortunate for the painter that he could command the attention of the highest in the land with his first serious effort, for the future was at once assured; and if it was well for the painter, it is better [52] still for us. How many notable men has he rescued from the comparative oblivion of the printed record? In how many cases has he helped us to correct or justify the impressions of the historian? The human face tells its own story, and, when it is set down by a master-hand, we know something at least of the brain that worked behind it. Holbein was a realist. It was no part of his artistic intention to make a portrait a mere beautiful picture, to treat his subject pictorially in fashion that would flatter a sitter's vanity. Perhaps he had not the dangerous quality of imagination that would make such a procedure possible. He saw clearly, fully, dispassionately, and set down on paper or canvas just what he had seen—neither more nor less. Even the Renaissance decorations that had delighted him [53] as a boy were laid aside long before he came from Basle to London, and such mere cleverness as he permitted himself was done obviously enough to attract custom, and was to be seen in the skilful composition of his portrait groups. He was a hard-headed, serious artist, and appealed to a singularly level-headed generation, that had not been educated up or down to the special genius of the Renaissance portrait painters of Italy. For in spite of the exquisite and well-nigh inimitable quality of the Italian masters, their work would have seemed rather exotic in our colder clime. Moreover, the days of revolt against the spirit that so many of them expressed were upon the land.

We cannot say with any certainty when or why Holbein decided to try his fortune [54] in England. It is likely that one of the English noblemen travelling on the Continent, the Earl of Surrey or the Earl of Arundel, was the first to advise him to visit this island; and when the troubles that beset art in Basle made a change imperative, the painter applied to Erasmus for introductions and received one to Sir Thomas More, to whom he was advised to take one of his portraits of Erasmus as a sample of his talent. Apparently the good folks of Basle were a little startled, and even vexed, to find that their premier artist was leaving them. They are said to have put obstacles in the way of his departure, but he would not be denied. Holbein travelled by way of Antwerp, attracted by the works of Quentin Matsys, and in 1526 he reached London, presented himself to [55] the Chancellor, and made such a favourable impression that he was received forthwith and installed in his home at Chelsea. His gratitude was expressed quickly and significantly. Sir Thomas himself was the first in the long roll of distinguished men who have perhaps obtained a larger measure of immortality from Holbein's brush than from the work of their own hands.

But for Erasmus and Lord Surrey, the painter might have languished for lack of opportunity to show his powers. He might even have returned to the Continent, where his varied gifts commanded a certain market, and in that case the long roll of Tudor worthies would not have been preserved to us, and the bright light that he has thrown upon a fascinating period of our history would have been lost. But the Chancellor himself, [56] apparently no mean judge of good work, moved in the centre of the most select and refined circle in Christendom, and as soon as he had expressed his satisfaction with the painter's work there was no lack of sitters. Perhaps an artist would say that the quality of the sitter's face does not matter, and that personality is of small account, but from the layman's point of view this is not the case. The born ruler, the administrator, scholar, soldier, poet, must be more interesting to most of us than the person whose only qualification for an appearance on canvas is the capacity to pay for it. Holbein's sitters were worthy of his brush, and between 1526 and 1529 the artist made an enduring reputation in London, where, according to some at least of his chroniclers, he came under the notice of [57] King Henry, although he does not appear to have done any work for him on the occasion of his first visit.

The sojourn of nearly three years completed, the painter returned to his home in Basle, and occupied himself in that city until 1531. He would seem to have made up his mind to try the Continent again before yielding to the invitations he had received in England. Then again he had domestic affairs to settle, and they were not of the easiest, for his wife had certain good reasons to feel aggrieved, and Holbein did not regard constancy as one of the indispensable conditions of married life. In order that he might not be troubled overmuch on his return to our shores, he decided to leave his wife and family in Basle, where he left provision for all their wants. He never failed [58] to look after his children and do his best for them. In days when there was neither regular postal service nor telegrams nor newspapers, he could live his own life without fear of any remonstrances; and we know enough of his progress in these islands to be satisfied that, had he brought his wife over, she would have had sound and sufficient reason to complain. The religious squabbles in Basle would seem to have made it hard for any artist to earn a living, and between the dates of his return and his second visit to this country he found little work for his brush. Happily he was equipped in every branch, and as his work as a painter was not in great demand, he went to the gold workers and the printers, and did not go to them in vain. They were happy enough to employ him, and work that he executed at this period of his career is one of the prizes of the collector and the connoisseur.

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PLATE VII.—SIR RICHARD SOUTHWELL

(In the Uffizi Gallery, Florence)

This striking portrait of one of Holbein's contemporaries is one of the best examples of the master's work in Italy. A study for the finished picture may be seen at Windsor, and there is another copy in the Louvre. It was Sir Richard Southwell who did much to bring about the fall of Sir Thomas More.

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When in 1531 the painter returned to England he could stand alone, and this was well for him, since Sir Thomas More was born to learn that the favour of princes is not remarkable for a quality of permanence. There would seem to have been no lack of work for Holbein as long as he lived. Here we may remark that the date of his death is in dispute, some authorities placing it as early as 1543, while others grant him another eleven years—a very valuable concession to any poor mortal, but one that the Fates do not appear to have granted, 1543 being the probable date of his death, and the Plague the cause.

He was not satisfied with portraits for long. The Steelyard, of which we shall soon [62] speak at length, gave him subject pictures to paint. King Henry took him into his service with a retainer of £30 a year, no inconsiderable sum in those days, and payment for all works done, and he soon became a painter of the pictures that are produced to commemorate state occasions. Happily he painted them better than some more modern men have been able to. It is hardly a reproach to a man that he cannot invest with special interest a picture that is to all intent and purpose composed for him, a canvas on which the figures must be handled less with regard to composition than precedence, and really Holbein did very well. His education was certain to tell in his favour; he began to enjoy the fruits of his association with the Humanists. Great painters employed at European Courts enjoyed a certain [63] ambassadorial rank: the interest taken in art was so considerable, that the gift of a picture by a great artist was as fine a present as could be given or received, and when artists were sent to foreign courts they were often entrusted with missions not associated directly or indirectly with their profession.

To be sure, Holbein did not hold the same high position that fell to Peter Paul Rubens, but he was entrusted on two occasions with missions of a very delicate character, being instructed to paint the portraits of ladies whom the king had married or was prepared to marry. The Dowager Duchess of Milan was one of the few who declined to become Queen of England, and Anne of Cleves was one who was less discriminating. There can be no doubt that [64] Holbein's capacity for expressing strength in the most delicate fashion imaginable appealed very strongly to his sitters. The rugged character of one man's head, the delicate lines of a woman's face, could be expressed without violence in the one case or excess of sentiment in the other, and he does not seem to have done more than present his sitters in their most attractive aspect, and with due regard to their salient characteristics. He did not flatter and he did not shock, but would seem to have found something at once pleasant and true to express about all his sitters.

Although it does not seem unreasonable to believe that Holbein would have lacked work on his return to England, even if the social troubles of the time had been even greater than they were, it must be admitted [65] that the painter was very fortunate in securing the patronage of the Steelyard, the great German or Anglo-German trading company established on the banks of the Thames. It was associated with the Hanseatic League; its buildings extended over a large part of the city in the neighbourhood of Thames Street and Cannon Street; its members had a Guildhall with beautiful garden in a place where London is almost at its ugliest to-day, and the Steelyard Tavern was a very noted house. To the Steelyard came all the traffic of the Orient, all the spices of the merchant. As much of Europe as had the desire to trade with England—then only a second-rate power—relied largely upon the agency of the Steelyard. The Corporation that governed the undertaking would seem to have been a [66] very capable body, and in return for the privileges granted to it by successive rulers, every member was sworn to play a man's part in the defence of London. We have nothing like the Steelyard in Great Britain to-day, but the East India Company probably had much in common with it; and had Rhodesia proved worthy of the highest hopes entertained by its founder, the Chartered Company might have been conducted on similar lines. Such associations are apt to spring up when an old country discovers a new one. German trading associations were as pushful in Renaissance times as they are to-day, and more artistic. It should be remembered that Bellini, Titian, and Tintoretto worked for German merchants in Venice.

When Holbein came back to London to [67] find Warham and Colet dead, and Sir Thomas More, with but a little space

of life left, retiring from the high office of Chancellor, he seems to have found new friends in the Steelyard; and perhaps because he was anxious to establish a position among the members of the richest trading guild of his time, he seems to have devoted a great deal of care and time to his world-famous portrait of George Gisze, one of the merchants of the Steelyard. The picture, in an admirable condition of preservation, is to be seen in the Berlin Gallery, and is one of the richest, most decorative portraits ever painted by the artist. It will be found reproduced in these pages, and perhaps there will be some who will wonder whether the artist did not work deliberately to interest and astonish his new clients, and whether, for that purpose, [68] he did not depart from his usual reticence and good taste. The portrait of Gisze himself, a handsome man, wearing a bright scarlet doublet under a black cloak, is admirable, it arrests and holds the attention. But the heterogeneous mass of accessories startles and tires the spectator. Vase and flowers, scissors, book, scales, letters, golden balls, inscription, keys, watches, seals—there seems to be no limit to the material with which Holbein has loaded his canvas, and the accessories are all so well painted that they seem to be wasted. There is no reason to doubt that Holbein was deliberately painting a picture for purpose of advertisement, and that he intended to make his appeal to a class that, for all its business acumen and commercial intelligence, was not on the same intellectual plane as the men of Sir Thomas More's world.

[69]

PLATE VIII.—SIR HENRY WYATT
(In the Louvre)

This portrait of Sir Henry Wyatt, a bust on panel with green background, was long thought to stand for the painter's friend and patron Sir Thomas More, and it has been left for modern research to discover the mistake. Holbein painted this portrait twice. There is a replica in the National Gallery of Ireland.

[70]

[71]

If this was his intention, he can at least plead that it was entirely successful. Not only did it delight the magnates of the Steelyard, who showered commissions upon him as long as he could execute them, it carried the story of his fame to the last corner of the earth where the story of a man's achievement can obtain a generous hearing, that is to his own city. Burgomaster Meier zum Hirten, not to be confused with that other Meier who married Dorothea Kannegiesser and looks at us to-day from the walls of the Basle Museum, wrote to Holbein in London inviting him to return, with the promise of a retainer of thirty gulden annually. But the painter had learned that the tender mercies of the inartistic are cruel, and he was now beyond the [72] need for any of the service that Basle could offer.

Of Holbein's work for the Steelyard, the greater part has been lost. It will be remembered that the Guild fell on troublous times in the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and its Hall suffered a long period of neglect. We may say that we should not have a very complete knowledge of the artist's output had his sketches been no better preserved than his finished work. We know, too, that the Council of the Steelyard recognised in the painter of George Gisze a man whose attainments covered every field of art; and a year after he had distinguished himself in their service for the first time, he was put in charge of the pageant arranged by the Steelyard in honour of the Coronation of the unfortunate Anne

Boleyn. He painted [73] the "Triumph of Riches" and "Triumph of Poverty" for the Steelyard, but nothing remains of these pictures save a sketch for the former that may be studied to-day in Paris.

Whether Holbein's work outside the circle of the merchants was the result of his earlier association, or came to him through the intimate connection between the great guild and a certain section of the aristocracy, is a disputed point; but we incline to the belief that the painter's position was fully recognised, and that if work was rather slow in reaching him from the ranks of the men he had known on the occasion of his first visit, the times were to blame. Statesmen and churchmen had been his patrons, now they were fighting for their lives. But very soon after he had painted the portrait of [74] George Gisze, Holbein gave to the world the famous picture known as "The Ambassadors," now hanging in our National Gallery, and reproduced here. The man on the left is generally held to be Sieur Jean de Dinteville, French Ambassador to the Court of Henry VIII., and his companion is said to be George de Selve, who was French Ambassador to the Court of the great Emperor Charles V.

When Anne Boleyn had suffered the fullest possible penalty for marrying Henry VIII., Holbein painted her successor. He prepared a chalk drawing of the unfortunate Jane Seymour and painted two portraits from it, one being in Vienna and the other at Woburn Abbey; and he painted Henry himself for the Privy Chamber, which was burnt out in the closing years of the seventeenth century. The usual study in chalks was made [75] for this picture, and is now in Munich. In the Bodleian Library there is a drawing by Holbein of his exquisite design for the gold cup that was made when Edward VI. was born; and as soon as Jane Seymour was dead the painter went to Milan to paint his striking portrait of the young Christina of Denmark, who was Duchess of Milan, and a widow at the early age of sixteen. She it is who is said to have declined the offer of King Henry's hand, on the ground that she had but one head and wished to keep it on her shoulders. So she became the Duchess of Lorraine instead—small blame to her. We have referred already to the portrait of Anne of Cleves, now in the Louvre; before that was painted Holbein had given the world what is often regarded as his greatest effort in portraiture, the portrait of the [76] goldsmith Hubert Morett, now to be seen in the Dresden Gallery. For many years this picture was supposed to be the work of Leonardo da Vinci. It is one of the special functions of art criticism to give the credit of unknown pictures to Da Vinci or Giorgione—apparently to allow the next generation of criticism to take that credit away again. One may remark in passing that Leonardo da Vinci has fared very badly of late, but doubtless he will soon be restored to critical favour.

Thomas Howard, Duke of Norfolk, and twice uncle to the king by marriage, was painted when Anne of Cleves had been retired on a pension, and the star of Catherine Howard was in its brief ascendant. Holbein is said to have painted the new queen. There is a miniature as well as a chalk drawing in Windsor that is said to stand [77] for her. And doubtless the king would have continued to find new wives, and Holbein would have continued to paint them, but for the fact that both king and painter were nearing their end. The portraits of the doctors of the royal household, Dr. Butt and Dr. Chambers, are among the last of the great works he accomplished. In the month of October 1843, at the time when the Plague was in London, the artist made a will which was found some years ago in the City of London. By this document Hans Holbein sought to protect two of his illegitimate children of tender age, directing that all his goods should be sold, and the proceeds applied for their benefit as soon as certain debts had been paid. Curiously enough, we have no means of finding out who the children were, we do not know [78] the mother's name, all is obscure. But we know that Holbein had settled an earlier legacy upon his wife and legitimate issue, that he had apprenticed his eldest son to a jeweller in Paris, and that he had never been unmindful of his legal obligations to his family. For the rest, he had made a hasty marriage that was not founded upon affection so much as upon convenience—and it is not for us to judge him save as an artist, and then modestly and with due thought of our own limitations. He was buried either in the Church of St. Andrew Undershaft or St. Catherine Cree; in the hour of his death there was no anxiety to do more than get the dead underground as soon as possible. It will be remembered that another of the world's great painters, Titian Vecelli, died of the Plague too, but Titian had reached a [79] very great age, while Holbein was in the prime of life, capable, had he been spared, of much more work in every branch of art.

He worked for about thirty years in the light of history for the "Virgin and Child," the picture with panels in the Renaissance mood is dated 1514, and the picture of Dr. Chambers belongs to the early forties. To sum up his known achievements with no more than a brief description would exhaust all the pages of this little sketch. His work retains much of its freshness, although time and the restorer have combined to do it wrong; and there are pictures that pass for the work of Holbein's hand, though it is more than likely that he never saw them. He must have been a man of infinite capacity, untiring industry, and considerable strength [80] of character; he owed little to outside help, for when he left Augsburg for Basle he was almost without friends and influence, while, when he left London for the bourn from which no traveller returns, he had made a reputation that has lasted to this hour, and will never be destroyed while western civilisation endures.

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